

People recycle more when they know what recyclable waste becomes

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Researchers from Penn State University and Boston College published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing*, which finds that helping consumers think about how recyclables become new products inspires consumers to recycle more.

Around the world, sustainability programs are fast becoming a staple of the private sector. However, consumers' [recycling](#) habits have not kept pace. In fact, only 25.8% of waste was recycled in the United States and only 13% of [municipal solid waste](#) was recycled globally in 2015.

The research team conducted six studies to test how promoting recyclable waste will be transformed into [new products](#) (product transformation salience) can increase recycling rates.

In the first study, participants were asked to dispose of some scratch paper. Participants who saw a recycling message involving recycled material being transformed into the same product—paper (80.5%), or a different product, a guitar (79.1%)—recycled more than participants who saw a generic recycling message not involving product transformation (50.9%).

The second study showed that participants who viewed advertisements for [products](#) made from identified recycled plastic items were more likely to recycle (87.7%) than those who viewed advertisements for products that only mention the company engages in recycling practices (71.7%).

The third study compared three messages to confirm that transformation salience increases recycling even when no specific product output is identified from the transformation (i.e., simply telling consumers that recycling gives recyclables a new life). The research team found that transformation messaging increases recycling by inspiring people to recycle—in other words, getting people to think about the possibilities from transformation is the key to increased recycling rates.

The final three studies were conducted in the field. In the first study, a Google Ads campaign for a jeans recycling program generated a click-through rate of 0.26% for a product transformation recycling

advertisement versus 0.18% for a recycling advertisement not emphasizing product transformation. In the next study, conducted before a university football game, tailgating fans recycled 58.1% of their waste after being told what products could be made from recyclables, whereas those receiving a traditional recycling message about what could be recycled only recycled 19% of their waste. Finally, the team did an audit of two university residence hall waste collection stations. On the product transformation salience floor, when the signage included products made from recyclables, 51.5% of the material headed to the landfill could have been recycled, whereas 62.9% of the material in the control floor's landfill bin was recyclable, suggesting that the transformation message led students to place more of their recyclable material in recycling bins instead of the landfill bin.

"This research has important implications for companies and organizations seeking to increase recycling rates. These studies provide compelling evidence that when consumers consider that recyclables are transformed into something new, they recycle more," said Winterich. "Increasing [transformation](#) salience among consumers should be a priority for any organization seeking to increase collection rates. Increased recycling offers not only societal and environmental benefits, but also provides the source materials companies need for sustainable production of goods in a circular economy."

More information: Karen Page Winterich et al, Knowing What It Makes: How Product Transformation Salience Increases Recycling, *Journal of Marketing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242919842167](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919842167)

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